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ACCUSATIONS OF BLASPHEMY IN ENGLISH ANTI-QUAKER POLEMIC, C. 1660–1701*

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigates the conviction amongst zealous English Protestants, living between 1660 and 1701, that Quakerism constituted a form of blasphemy. Through an analysis of the accusation of blasphemy in anti-Quaker polemic it develops a cultural history of blasphemy as representation, illuminating a spiritual critique of Quakerism as enthusiastic antitrinitarianism and a sense of blasphemy commensurate with Thomistic theology. In so doing, this paper provides an insight into the contemporary theological anxiety that Quakerism was fundamentally wicked and anti-Christian.

KEYWORDS

blasphemy; anti-Quaker; polemic; theology; antitrinitarianism; enthusiasm

INTRODUCTION

In the two years 1697–98, the Quaker apostate turned vicious anti-Quaker Francis Bugg (1640–1727) published two savage tracts against Quakerism as part of his long-running campaign to provoke Quakers into public debate: a battle of words which he believed would result in the destruction of Quakerism.¹ Bugg's aggressive stance would have been an embarrassment to many irenical clergy; nevertheless, he enjoyed the patronage of the bishop of Norwich, John Moore (1646–1714), as well as more general support from several Norfolk clergymen.² Indeed, on 27 October 1698, clerical representatives from Bugg's circle wrote a letter to a group of local Quakers, led by Richard Ashby (1663?–1734), making plain their grievances:

- I. *We Charge you with Blasphemy against God.*
- II. *With Blasphemy against Jesus Christ.*
- III. *With Blasphemy against the Holy Scriptures.*
- IV. *We Charge you with great contempt of Civil Magistracy, and the Ordinances which Jesus Christ Instituted, viz. Baptism by Water, and the Lord's Supper, with Bread and Wine.*

V. *We Charge you, that the Light within as taught by you, leaves you without any certain Rule, and Exposes you to the aforementioned, and many other Blasphemies.*³

This provocation saw Bugg's wish finally granted. On 8 December 1698 Bugg and his followers clashed with Quakers in a public debate at West Dereham Church, Norfolk.⁴ The meeting proved an anticlimax, quickly descending into intractable wrangling about how the conference had arisen in the first place and what textual evidence was admissible. However, the controversy continued in print and a bitter theological battle ensued. This kind of dispute was far from uncommon; for in the theological debates of the second half of the seventeenth century, Quakers were accused of blasphemy on a scale endured by no other contemporary religious group.

Such accusations can be shown to have been much more than an aggressive rhetorical strategy to lambaste Quakers, even though those who accused Quakers of blasphemy were not necessarily attempting to initiate criminal proceedings since the complex and obscure crime of blasphemy was rarely invoked against anyone. While the so-called Blasphemy Act of 1650, which not only covered human denials and appropriations of God but also laid an emphasis on accepting actions as diverse as drunkenness, sodomy, and murder as transgressions of divine law, was used against Quakers in the early 1650s, its efficacy was suspect. Moreover, since the Act was a piece of commonwealth legislation it was annulled upon the Restoration of the Monarchy in 1660. A much narrower and weaker Blasphemy Act that focused on denying the doctrine of the Trinity appeared on the statute book in 1698, but this appears to have never been used. At common law, prosecutions for blasphemy were principally against blasphemous language (written or spoken) and were entangled with modes of spiritual offence and libel. In many of the known cases, the criteria for criminal blasphemy were based upon a vague sense of wickedness rather than a discrete set of definable transgressions. In 1677, for example, Lodowick Muggleton (1609–1698) was found guilty at the Old Bailey of publishing works that were 'so horrid and blasphemous, that we think it fit to spare the Christian modesty of each pious ear', but further details about his crime were not disclosed.⁵ Given that the nature of criminal blasphemy was so imprecise and open to interpretation,⁶ the suggestion by scholars such as Rosemary Moore that Quaker organisation and self-censorship kept Quakers from being prosecuted for blasphemy is overly simplistic; so too is Richard Bailey's claim that Quaker radicalism can be seen as proportional to blasphemy prosecutions.⁷

In this paper I want to take an alternative approach that will move away from critiques of criminal blasphemy and focus on the accusation of blasphemy as a symptom of theological division between Quakers and Protestant non-Quakers. Many non-Quakers took such exception to the theological precepts of Quakerism, particularly its Christology *vis-à-vis* the doctrine of the Trinity, that they became anti-Quakers who openly challenged the validity of Quakerism and labelled it inherently wicked. This paper will explore how and why accusations of blasphemy were made against early Quakers in an attempt illuminate the contemporary notion of blasphemy and to understand better the anti-Quaker position on its own terms. In turn, it is hoped that this focus might stimulate further study into the history of early Quaker

theology. I do not seek to mediate between the history of Quakers and non-Quakers on the issue of theological orthodoxy, but rather to explore the polemic of anti-Quakers by considering blasphemy as theological representation: that is to say, the projection of perceptions of blasphemy in a theological context. Move away from the dominant modern conception of blasphemy as a mode of temporal offence between human beings,⁸ I shall argue that Quakerism was perceived by many anti-Quakers as blasphemous primarily because they believed it to be an example of enthusiastic antitrinitarianism commensurate with the Thomistic conception of blasphemy as aggravated unbelief.

My concern here is with what some scholars have called ‘heretical blasphemy’: a type of blasphemy hardly ever seen as applicable to post-medieval times and rarely expounded upon beyond the reasonable assumption that heresy also constituted blasphemy. In the context of contemporary religious culture, however, I want to re-interpret this category as ‘speculative blasphemy’, encompassing those ideas and beliefs that were deemed to be blasphemous on the grounds of substantial theological, exegetical, or epistemological claims. This situates the discourse of blasphemy within the context of ‘speculative theology’ and, hence, part of the profound debates among different Christian groups about the ‘authoritative interpretation of truth’.⁹ As the nonjuring clergyman Richard Welton (1672–1726) made clear, ‘by Renouncing any Doctrine, which...[God] hath reveal’d, and commanded; we do not only betray our Faith, and Trust; But we, in Effect, BLASPHEME his VERACITY, his *Revealed Truth*’.¹⁰ Thus, blasphemy was potentially manifest in heresy (a deliberate deviation from the doctrines of the accepted orthodoxy),¹¹ but whereas blasphemy was about the denial of God, heresy was principally concerned with the temporal tensions between unity and disunity within organised religion. The terminology of blasphemy was part of a spiritual critique of heterodoxies which derived meaning from theological discourse.

A Trinitarian conception of God was fundamental to orthodox Christianity. The belief that ‘there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one’ (1 Jn 5:7), was constituted as part of the Nicene Creed and developed further in what became known as the ‘Athanasian Creed’. This creedal definition informed the first article of faith according to the Church of England, as set down in the Thirty-Nine Articles of 1571, and it was also recognised in the Book of Common Prayer. It was the incarnate Christ and the Holy Spirit which, as co-substantial persons of the Trinity, provided the means by which spiritual knowledge was passed from God to humans, illuminating ‘rational’, non-providential modes of grace. To deny the Trinity in the quest for a closer relationship with God was perceived by most Protestants as misguided in the extreme because it demonstrated a desire for autonomy from divine will that tended towards an antisoteriological position. For zealous defenders of Trinitarian orthodoxy (taken here to be described by the ‘Athanasian Creed’), any form of non-Trinitarian doctrine was viewed as inherently antitrinitarian and not merely heresy but a form of speculative blasphemy because it negated both the nature and truth of God.¹²

According to St Augustinian, speculative blasphemy was a denial of self-evident and unquestionable divine truth, a lie about God himself that was caused and

perpetuated by human pride.¹³ The ability to believe a lie about God and to propagate it as truth, for example in the form of heresy, was the consummate skill of a false prophet and as St Augustine decreed, ‘every spirit that confesses not that Jesus Christ is come in the flesh is not of God: and is the antichrist’.¹⁴ The denial of Christ in Trinity was arguably what St Thomas Aquinas had in mind when he provided one of the most comprehensive discussions of blasphemy in his *Summa Theologica*.¹⁵ For Aquinas posited the idea that blasphemy was aggravated unbelief and was generally understood via a threefold description: when something was attributed to God which was not his; or when God was denied something that was his; or when an attribute of God was bestowed upon a creature. Aquinas did not actually own this view, although he was one of the first theologians to give such an exposition, for he preferred to conceive blasphemy more abstractly as denying God via the two processes of (erroneous) affirmation or negation. This substantial description of blasphemy was intertwined with inferences of a more modal account of blasphemy as aggravated unbelief. In all, Aquinas understood blasphemy to be the worst mortal sin ‘foreasmuch as it made any sin greater’.¹⁶

This paper will demonstrate that between 1660 and 1701 many anti-Quakers were consumed by abject terror that Quakers were blasphemers. A thematic analysis of the supposed blasphemy of early Quakerism will be undertaken by using the points raised in the Norfolk clergy’s charge sheet to structure an investigation of the substantive detail of that controversy and of a further four theological debates which will be outlined in a moment. Before turning to the evidence, however, it is necessary to sketch out the relevant historiography and provide an overview of early Quaker theology and anti-Quaker polemic.

HISTORIOGRAPHY

While studies of early Quakers and Quakerism regularly provide a cursory account of Quakers prosecuted for blasphemy, there has yet to be any sustained investigation of the representation of Quakers as blasphemers. Partly as a result, a scholarly assessment of the perceived blasphemy of early Quakerism has hitherto arguably been reduced to one notorious episode: the trial of the Quaker preacher James Nayler (1618–1660) for ‘horrid blasphemy’ by the Second Protectorate Parliament in 1656.¹⁷ Nayler’s primary transgression was represented as imitating Christ’s ride into Jerusalem at Bristol. This might be construed primarily as a form of practical, rather than speculative, blasphemy. Moreover, the context of Nayler’s trial was heavily influenced by post-revolution politics, particularly the Protectorate’s religious settlement, and it may be suggested that political intervention resulted in Nayler being made an example of because he was a charismatic leader of a supposedly dangerous and ill-understood movement, rather than an exponent of blasphemous Quakerism in particular. The fact that Nayler’s prosecutors chose not to invoke the Act of 1650, but to use the exceptional legal jurisdiction of Parliament, underscores this point and perhaps emphasises the extent to which socio-political anxieties dominated the proceedings. While much has been written about Nayler’s trial there has yet to be a sustained study of his ‘blasphemy’ *qua* blasphemy. Due to the exceptional nature of the case

and the methodological challenges of investigating criminal blasphemy, such work lies with another enquiry. However, I would suggest that Nayler's case has inadvertently diverted scholarly attention away from appreciating the extent to which the contemporary representation of Quaker blasphemy concerned speculative theology and, hence, scholars need to look again at the wider spiritual fears of anti-Quakers.

A historiographical appreciation of the significance of theological context to early Quaker studies has been only recently established. Influential historians such as Christopher Hill and Barry Reay firmly cast early Quakers as socio-political radicals whose religious beliefs led them to subvert civil order and authority.¹⁸ According to this critique early Quaker theology was forged by the revolutionary environment and provided a foil for a distinctly worldly agenda. Thus, Quaker radicalism quickly diminished after the Restoration due to an unhinging of millenarian hopes from contemporary political reality and the debilitating effects of persecution. Since the historiography of the early Quakers has been dominated by socio-political approaches, few subsequent studies have had cause to consider the revolutionary interpretation of early Quaker theology.¹⁹ Furthermore, until relatively recently, scholars were often restricted by their own erroneous perception that Quaker theology was, in the absence of identifiable theological treatises, adequately presented by Robert Barclay's *An Apology for the True Christian Divinity* (Latin 1676; English 1678).²⁰ Indeed, for the most part, Restoration Quaker theology has been understood within the paradigm of 'defeat';²¹ and hence subordinated to a socio-political interpretation of early Quaker history.

Ted Underwood's pioneering work *Primitivism, Radicalism, and the Lamb's War* (1997) finally established an understanding of early Quaker theology on its own terms. By investigating theological debates between Quakers and Baptists, Underwood argued that it was a profound, although abstract, commitment to primitive Christianity that fashioned Quaker perceptions of divine inspiration; forming a theology that was non-Trinitarian, highly spiritual, and dismissive of Scripture and traditional doctrine. Quaker theology was less the product of revolution specifically and more 'the *fag-end* of the Reformation'.²² As the recent works of Richard Bailey, Michael Mullett, and Rosemary Moore have shown; early Quakerism was theologically radical.²³ This interpretation and the revolutionary view are not mutually exclusive. However, it is important to acknowledge that supposed Quaker enthusiasm was critiqued by contemporaries from both socio-political and theological perspectives and that, due to a previous historiographical bias towards the former, there is still much to understand about early Quaker theology and its reception. Indeed, as Michael Heyd has recently speculated, post-Restoration hostility towards Quaker enthusiasm was part of a wider trend to question the legitimacy of claims to divine inspiration rather than the substance of divinely inspired actions.²⁴

EARLY QUAKER THEOLOGY AND ANTI-QUAKER POLEMIC

The foundation of Quaker theology was a belief in the Light within, the immediate inspiration of God in the believer. Once established, Quakers believed that the Light within became the primary authority in all matters of faith, taking precedence over

mediated authorities such as the words of creeds or Scripture: the premise being that the Apostles had not read texts in order to establish a relationship with God.²⁵ Inspired by primitivism and Reformation zeal, traditional typologies of theology and language were circumvented.²⁶ In theory, the Light within gave indisputable legitimacy, and hence authority, to the protestations of every believer, creating the possibility for massive multiplicity. A consequence of the doctrine of the Light within was that the nature and expression of Quaker theology appeared inherently individualistic.²⁷ Yet the risk of individualistic idiosyncratic interpretations of the Light within quickly became obvious to leading Quakers and measures were taken to combat such views.²⁸ As the Quaker leadership began to secure legitimacy and campaign for legal toleration in the 1660s and 1670s, they moved towards an anti-individualistic doctrine of the Light within that was more acquiescent to the fundamentals of Protestant theology, particularly with regards to the Trinity. Indeed, it was the Quakers' ability to convince the authorities of a consensual belief in the doctrine of the Trinity which helped them secure legal toleration in 1689.²⁹ One of the Quakers' greatest apologists, George Whitehead (1637–1724), publically affirmed the Quakers' belief in the Trinity in *The Christianity of the People commonly called Quakers* (1689) and the founder of the Quaker movement George Fox (1624–1691) used his *Journal* (1694) to rebut the suggestion that the Quakers denied the 'Christ that died and suffered at Jerusalem'.³⁰

This shift created a potentially fatal paradox in Quaker theology: individual proclamations by first- and second-generation Quakers, which were retrospectively deemed incompatible with the public face of Quakerism as a form of Nonconformist Protestantism, could not be denounced because such repudiation would have argued Quakerism out of existence. The exact nature of the multifaceted, non-linear development of early Quaker theology is not my concern here; however, I wish to suggest that the Quaker paradox meant that anti-Quakers could set about proving Quakerism to be blasphemously heterodox by using the Quakers' own words. As will be shown below, it was this paradox that fuelled controversy and exacerbated the theological claims that the Quakers were wicked liars. Accepting that early Quaker theology was contestable by nature and that historical sources are invariably framed by contemporary arguments with anti-Quakers, it is, nevertheless, important to provide a sketch of the dominant characteristics of the individualistic manifestation of Quaker theology. The summary that follows draws upon the work of Leo Damrosch and Ted Underwood, but takes as given that no definitive account of early Quaker theology can be written because early Quakers regularly equivocated about their beliefs and that their early theology was, quite understandably, somewhat fluid and contestable precisely because it was a new and developing belief system.

Early Quaker conceptions of the Light within seemed to rest upon a Christology which tended towards a quasi-Unitarian position that emphasised the oneness of Christ and God the Father, largely disregarding the Holy Spirit (I use the term 'Unitarian' advisedly to refer to the belief in the unipersonality of the Godhead: this should not be confused with certain types of Unitarianism, such as Arianism and Socinianism, which stressed the humanity of Jesus rather than his divinity).³¹ The terms Christ, God, and Holy Spirit were not denied, but appeared to have been used interchangeably to describe the Light, rather than to acknowledge the existence of

distinct divine persons. Early Quakers most commonly identified the Light with Christ, professing that the pre-incarnate and the incarnate Christ were the same. Christ on earth was, therefore, not manifest in human form, but a celestial being in the vessel of a human body. Thus, from this position Christ was wholly supernatural and provided a uniquely spiritual soteriology. To many contemporary anti-Quakers, Quakerism seemed akin to a series of heresies, including Docetism, Sabellianism, Arianism, and Socinianism.³² While such assertions were inaccurate, they underscored the central principle on which Quaker theology was adjudged heterodox: its non-Trinitarianism.

The Quakers' type of non-Trinitarianism meant that they rejected the traditional tenets of Christian belief: faith was not a bridge between human and divine, and mortals did not receive the grace of God, but experienced him immediately (i.e. without mediation). For the Quakers, the language of 'inwardness' was effectively a euphemism for the only true way to form a relationship with Christ; for his celestial being had no cause, or means, to mediate with humans, but dwelt within them. Although Richard Bailey's exposition of Quaker Christology is somewhat unconvincing (perhaps because he tries to establish it as more stable and uniform than it actually was), one can appreciate the thrust of his argument that Quaker conviction hinged upon a Christo-present, rather than Christo-centric belief system.³³ Akin to the Familists before them,³⁴ Quakers could have been seen as quintessential religious enthusiasts, rejecting 'outward' manifestations of religion and claiming a form of oneness with God.³⁵ A consequence of the Quakers' apparent individualistic theology was that it appeared that Quaker beliefs were heavily influenced by its most charismatic believers. The personal cult of George Fox provided a forum for him to claim that he was the 'Son of God' and able to perform prophecies and miracles. Such assertions were, as Rosemary Moore has shown, rarely verified or supported by other Quakers.³⁶ However, James Nayler was another 'Quaker Jesus' who regularly described himself and the Quakers in highly exalted language.³⁷ The Quaker James Milner also claimed the power of prophecy; while brethren such as John Gilpin (fl. 1653–55) and John Toldervy (fl. 1656) were said to have exhibited signs of spiritual possession.³⁸ These claims are important to understanding how contemporary non-Quakers perceived Quakerism; however, it must also be acknowledged that the Quaker movement later marginalised and disowned the significance of such claims in their own history.³⁹

The perception that Quaker enthusiasm was blasphemous may be traced back to the prosecutions of Quakers under the so-called Blasphemy Act of 1650. One section of the Act called for punishment against those who professed themselves 'to be very God, or to be Infinite or Almighty, or in Honor, Excellency, Majesty and Power to be equal, and the same with the true God'.⁴⁰ On 30 October 1650, two Justices of the Peace, Gervase Bennett and Nathaniel Barton, found George Fox and his companion John Fretwell guilty of blasphemy under the terms of the Act, and committed them to the house of correction in Derby.⁴¹ I would concur with Kate Peters that this event, along with a reading of the Act as pertaining to Quakerism, was formative in shaping early anti-Quaker arguments.⁴² As anti-Quaker polemic took off, leading Quakers continued to be arrested and incarcerated for blasphemy, although few

charges reached formal trial.⁴³ From the very inception of the Quaker movement, the theology of the Light within was undermined by a perception, embellished by the law, that it was inherently and self-evidently blasphemous.

Away from critiques of infamous individuals, much of the literature against the Quakers focused on wider aspects of speculative theology. On the eve of the Restoration, George Fox's epic apology *The Great Mistery of the Great Whore Unfolded* (1659) encapsulated the intensity and character of the theological war with anti-Quakers that had been raging during the 1650s. From scores of anti-Quaker tracts, Fox had selected particular accusations against Quakerism and rebutted them point by point. In referring to the Quakers' perception of Christ's human body, Richard Baxter (1615–1691) had asked, '*Do not they blasphemously make Christ an Idoll, that call our Temples, Idols Temples [?]*'; Fox's riposte was that, 'Christ's body was and is the Temple of God, who ended all outward Temples made with hands, and so that is no idol, but others are Idols, held up by you and the Pope'.⁴⁴ The Independent minister Samuel Eaton (d. 1665) asserted that, '*It is palpably false, and blasphemy to say, that the Saints know all things, and have power to work miracles to the glory of God*'; Fox answered '*But yee have anointing from the holy one, and know all things, I John 2.20.*'⁴⁵ In response to the claim that '*It is blasphemy they say and colourable pretences to witness an infallible spirit in them*', Fox stated that, 'The spirit that leads the Saints into all truth, is infallible and that shall reprove the world, and he that hath the spirit of Christ, hath that which is infallible'.⁴⁶ To the allegation that the Quakers were full of '*blasphemous pride, to say they are as pure as God*', Fox answered 'doth not Christ say; *Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect*, is that blasphemy?'⁴⁷ This was polemical theology at its rawest: horror and disbelief of an opponent's position forced a polarisation of the debate; any one issue was concentrated to just a few sentences, with each side looking for the knockout blow; the terminology of idolatry, pride, and pretence provided the necessary theological cues for the accusation of blasphemy. What has so far gone largely unrecognised by historians is that this type of polemical conflict continued well into the 1690s and beyond. At this juncture I want to quickly introduce four debates which, in addition to the one instigated by the Norfolk clergy in 1698, I shall draw upon for evidence to support my arguments. The following mini-case studies are just four examples of a large and diverse number of theological debates involving Quakers, but they have been chosen here for their particular usage of the discourse of blasphemy.

In 1668 the London based Presbyterian minister Thomas Vincent (1634–1678) remonstrated with local Quakers he believed to be guilty of corrupting his own congregation. Exasperated by defections, he warned his fellow Presbyterians that, 'If ever you go again, I will give you up, and God will give you up, that you may believe a lie, and be damn'd' (a reference to 2 Thess. 2:10–13).⁴⁸ Incensed, two leading Quakers William Penn (1644–1718) and George Whitehead challenged Vincent to a public debate for 'Truth's-sake'.⁴⁹ Not long afterwards the two sides clashed at Vincent's Meeting House in Spitalfields, which was reportedly packed with Vincent's supporters hissing and laughing at Penn, calling him 'villain and blasphemer'.⁵⁰ Extended reports of the oral dispute soon appeared in print; whereupon Vincent took the opportunity to warn Penn and Whitehead that, 'The Lord convince you

both of this your wickedness and give you repentance, that you may recant those damnable speeches, whereby you have not only blasphemed God yourselves, but endeavoured to provoke others to do the like.⁵¹

By 1672 an unassuming Nonconformist minister from Hertfordshire called John Faldo (1634–1691)⁵² had become equally dismayed by Protestant apostasy: ‘He is a great stranger in our *Israel*, who observes not the great shoals that have been taken in the net of Quakerism’.⁵³ With his publishing debut, *Quakerism No Christianity* (1672), Faldo attempted to stem the flow of converts by proving Quaker theology baseless and anti-Christian.⁵⁴ The foundation of Faldo’s argument was that Christianity existed through the truth and purity of its doctrine, while Quakerism ‘made its way by, and began in blasphemies’.⁵⁵ William Penn acknowledged that Faldo’s move had been prompted by the ‘coming over of some of his Hearers to the Way we profess’;⁵⁶ but rather than fall into complacency, Penn returned fire with *Quakerism a New Nickname for Old Christianity* (1673). The two men continued to exchange blows, producing nine major publications between them in the next three years. Like many other disputes between Quakers and their adversaries, fear and resentment about conversion had proved a catalyst for detailed and intense theological controversy.

Another dispute broke out in the summer of 1676 when John Cheyney (fl. 1674–94), a Church of England clergyman from Burtonwood in Lancashire, had become alerted to defections in the nearby parish of Crowton. In response, Cheyney made his first foray into print with *A Skirmish Made Upon Quakerism* (1676),⁵⁷ attacking William Penn and denouncing Quakerism as nothing but a concoction of ‘God-blaspheming and Soul-damning Errours’.⁵⁸ At a mere fourteen pages long, Cheyney’s effort was rather inadequate, but it nevertheless met with printed ripostes from, among others, the local Quaker preacher Roger Haydock (1643–1696) and Penn himself. The pamphlet war that followed turned Cheyney and Haydock into staunch enemies and they eventually came face-to-face on 23 January 1677 in a public debate in front of hundreds of people at Arley Hall in Cheshire. Cheyney’s contention throughout was summed up by the title of one of his subsequent pamphlets: *Quakerism Proved to be Gross Blasphemy and Anti-Christian Heresie* (1677).

In 1696, the non-juror Charles Leslie (1650–1722) unleashed a polemical tour-de-force against Quakerism: *The Snake in the Grass: Or; Satan Transform’d into an Angel of Light*. The title of the work was inspired by St Paul’s warning to the Corinthians about the diabolism of ‘false apostles’ (2 Cor. 11:13–14); and the content was no less confrontational. Leslie lambasted ‘our Present **Obstinate** Quakers’, who ‘Fearlessly go on, and pretend themselves to the same **Extraordinary** Commission, of Immediate Divine Revelation’, dismissing such notions as ‘nothing short of Blasphemy; **Rank, Wild** Blasphemy!’⁵⁹ The blasphemous enthusiasm of Quakerism was ‘more dangerous than Atheism’, for it ‘steals away many Devout and Well-meaning Persons’.⁶⁰ Such charges did not go unanswered for long. One of the Quaker old guard, George Whitehead, weighed in with *An Antidote against the Venome of the Snake in the Grass* (1697), followed shortly afterwards by Joseph Wyeth (1663–1731) with *Anguis Flagellatus: Or a Switch for the Snake* (1699). With each tract well over two-hundred pages long, the tussle between Leslie and his Quaker adversaries was no puny pamphlet battle; it was a theologically charged polemical war.

At a national level, it may well have been the case that the Quaker leadership was able to convince the authorities that Quakerism was not radically heterodox, a view which facilitated *de jure* toleration in 1689 and a subsequent shift towards *de facto* acceptance as a Nonconformist group.⁶¹ Yet, at a local level, the experience and fear of defection frequently forced a diverse range of Protestants to discredit vigorously Quaker theology through disputation. To provide some tangible context to the anti-Quakers' preoccupation, it is worth highlighting that Adrian Davies has shown that Quaker membership in the county of Essex grew continuously between 1655 and 1684, and did not suffer significant decline until after 1714.⁶² For both Quakers and anti-Quakers alike, theological conflict was seen as a useful exercise in maintaining religious loyalty because, as Leo Damrosch has acknowledged, 'debate over fine points of doctrine was an important way of establishing group identity'.⁶³ Here, the nexus between oral and literary publication, which has hitherto been predominately understood via studies into popular culture, was clearly invaluable.⁶⁴ It allowed disputants to combine the immediacy of a face-to-face meeting in front of local crowds with the ability to reach out to interested parties in London and elsewhere. Kate Peters has recently illuminated the full extent of Quaker pamphleteering in religious disputes during the 1650s; however, it should be underscored that the sheer speed with which printed responses were produced, not to mention the detail and length of individual works, was not far short of astonishing: a clear testament to the vitality of debate on both sides. It was in this context that a diverse group of anti-Quakers consistently levelled accusations of blasphemy against the nature and perceived consequences of Quaker theology. Quakers took such allegations seriously and, showing little of the distrust of worldly speaking which governed their social interactions, refuted them with vigour and asserted their own theological position.⁶⁵

Scholars are now well aware that contemporary religious disputation, particularly oral debates, tended to be grounded in the scholastic tradition. Accordingly, strict protocols were to be observed: a worthy justification for taking part was essential; the rules of the debate and the central questions to be debated were to be set in advance; and the whole process was to be precise, dignified, and edifying.⁶⁶ Such ideals were not always adhered to; however, as Ann Hughes has shown, this did not undermine the role of formal disputation in the contest for religious truth between 'orthodox' and 'radical' groups during the Interregnum.⁶⁷ After the Restoration, Church of England clergy often sought to provoke public debates both to chastise and edify Presbyterian and Catholic adversaries.⁶⁸ In such instances, to decline a challenge, or not to respond directly or quickly to a question, would have resulted not only in loss of face, but serious wounding to a protagonist's cause, in a manner analogous to duelling. I would suggest, however, that scholars should be cautious of using standard modes of contemporary disputation to critique the Quaker theological disputes.

In debates with Quakers, the epistemological aims of disputation still held sway but the circumstances dictated that debate rarely comprised of a straightforward dichotomy between reasoned argument and astute rhetoric. The key strategy of anti-Quakers was to prove their opponents guilty from their own words.⁶⁹ Such was the conviction that it was 'almost impossible for the *Quakers* to withstand the Force of the Quotations taken out of their Books',⁷⁰ anti-Quaker polemical literature sometimes

consisted of little more than a title and a structured list of quotations taken from Quaker texts, with no interlinking commentary or analysis. Taking the Norfolk clergy's *A Brief Discovery of Some Blasphemous and Seditious Principles and Practices of the People, called Quakers* (1699) as a prime example, the text was the raw evidence in support of the charge provided in the title. Here, the polemical force of the work was largely based on an assumption that the reader would interpret the evidence in the same way as the author. Faced with supposedly obvious and unquestionable proof of their audacious heterodoxy, the Quakers' failure to capitulate both upped the stakes of the debate and confirmed the view of anti-Quakers that they were nothing but brazen liars. Francis Bugg, for one, stood aghast at the Quakers' attempts 'to defend, vindicate, or excuse every Error, every Blasphemy, every Seditious and Treasonable Principle'.⁷¹ Similarly, the clergyman Thomas Comber (1645–1699) noted that, 'each Writer states things according to his own conceit, Learning or Advantage; and withal they have rare Arts of Equivocation under colour of Figurative Expressions, and curious Salvoes to bring one another off from the brink of Blasphemy'.⁷² In an effort to legitimate their respective positions, both sides vigorously refuted the accusations of the enemy point by point, often reasserting their claims and embellishing them with scriptural quotations and theological polemic.⁷³

Furthermore, however collected and confident anti-Quakers may have appeared in the first instance, they were clearly enraged by the ability of supposedly wicked Quaker beliefs to corrupt otherwise innocent, God-fearing Christians. The abstract problem was spiritual, but the temporal effects of losing one's congregation were also devastating and only served to affirm a sense of spiritual crisis. The situation was little different for the Quakers: converts provided a crude measure of the effectiveness of Quaker preachers to proclaim the truth. For disputants, theological polemic took on the guise of attack as the best means of defence. The semblance of academic disputation had given way to a kill or be killed mentality. Quakers lamented the state of 'such *open War*', which had been proclaimed by their enemies.⁷⁴ Yet the willingness to go beyond discursive reasoning was a mark of the zealot, irrespective of the cause, and the Quakers proved to be the most extreme advocates. For example, in a manner reminiscent of the notorious stunts of Richard Farnworth (c. 1630–1666), the Quaker Solomn Eccles (1617?–1682) challenged John Cheyney to a five-day fast without food, drink, or sleep to see which religion was true.⁷⁵ Reason and rhetoric had collapsed into a boiling pot of polemical strategies, which were executed with as much passion as shrewdness, inevitably polarising the debate into a series of binary opposites. Just as the Church of England had perceived Catholicism to be not merely heresy but blasphemy, a form of counterfeit Christianity,⁷⁶ the same was now the case for the anti-Quakers' view of Quakerism.

THE REPRESENTATION OF QUAKERISM AS BLASPHEMY

The representation of Quakerism as blasphemy was rooted in the perceived nexus between its antitrinitarianism and enthusiasm. Scripture stated that, 'Whosoever transgresseth, and abideth not in the doctrine of Christ, hath not God. He that abideth in the doctrine of Christ, hath both the Father and Son' (2 John 9).⁷⁷ 'But

what Sin is it to deny or suppress one's own [belief in God], and submit to another's Inspiration?'⁷⁸ Anti-Quakers would appear to have believed that, whatever '[Satan] cannot affect by Atheism and Prophaneness: he attempts by Enthusiasm, under the pretence of an higher Religion, to root out the old so Divinely and firmly settled; for the taking away of the rational motives of Faith, and the sensible grounds of Religion.'⁷⁹ The Book of Deuteronomy (18:20),⁸⁰ and the Second Epistle of St Peter (2:1) gave stark warning of 'false prophets', detailing the destruction they would bring and the divine vengeance they would suffer. Furthermore, St Paul described how God could enforce the delusions of those that did not believe his truth as a form of providential punishment, so 'that they should believe a lie: that they all might be damned who believe not the truth, but had pleasure in unrighteousness' (2 Thess. 2:10-13).⁸¹

Anti-Quakers were adamant that, 'The light in a *Quaker* differs from the light that is in an Anti-quaker',⁸² for the Quakers took the 'Light within to be God and Christ, and above the Scriptures; such be their Captains and foreleaders, who so maintain by their writings, and avow and defend for their chief principle'.⁸³ The Norfolk clergy asserted that, 'There is a spiritual Lunacy that possess *Quakers*, so that they speak Orthodoxy by fits, they are not always in the raving mood of Blasphemy, tho the mad fit was upon *Penn* and *Whitehead*...against the Trinity and the outward Blood'.⁸⁴ In attacking the Quakers, William Allen (d. 1686) made clear that, 'it cannot but be highly ridiculous for such as are ignorant in the very A, B, C, of Christianity...to pretend to such Sublimity and Spirituality'.⁸⁵ The Norfolk clergy made plain that, 'this Light of the *Quakers* be not any Beam of the true Light, but a spark from the Devil's Forge' and derided Quakerism as a 'counterfeit Commission' and nothing but impudent 'blasphemy'.⁸⁶ John Cheyney claimed that the Quakers did 'call *the light within* by the very name of God and Christ, and ascribe unto it the attributes of both, and are very Blasphemers and opinionative Idolaters'.⁸⁷ Quakers were represented as 'Rebel-traitor[s] against Christ and the name of God'.⁸⁸ According to the clergyman Thomas Bray (bap. 1658, d. 1730), the Light within 'Blasphemously entitles every foolish and deceitful Imagination of...[a Quaker's] corrupt Heart, to the Motion of the Holy Spirit'.⁸⁹ In sum, it was widely posited that Quakerism was shot through with the tincture of blasphemy. For the remainder of this paper, I shall provide some detail and clarity to this powerful but chaotic polemic by discussing the representation of the Quakers' blasphemy against the Trinity in general, then specifically against God, the incarnate Christ, the Scriptures, and scriptural sacraments.

For anti-Quakers, there was 'Blasphemy in the very denial of the Doctrine of the Trinity'.⁹⁰ Thomas Vincent, for one, was convinced that '*William Penn* plainly denieth...that the Lord Jesus Christ is God', and was thus guilty of 'wretched blasphemy!'⁹¹ At the 1668 meeting at Spittlefields, Vincent declared that, 'having proved the Trinity, *W. Pen* must either deny *Moses* and the Prophets, Christ and his Apostles, and God himself speaking from Heaven, or else confess the Blasphemy'.⁹² Here, the Presbyterian minister sought to force Penn to choose between the blasphemy of denying the reality of the Trinity, denigrating the substance of God, and the blasphemy of maintaining a lie about the truth of God. In other words, as far as Vincent was concerned, Penn had to capitulate because his position was totally

untenable. Yet Penn refused to be undone. In *The Sandy Foundation Shaken* (1668), which was partly a printed account of the oral debate, Penn reasserted his belief that Scripture and 'right reason' affirmed 'ONE to be God, and God to be ONE', and that since satisfaction was 'dependant on the Second Person of the imagin'd Trinity', it was but a 'Vulgar Doctrine'.⁹³ This twofold claim encapsulated the Quakers' Unitarianism: protestations of direct sanctification may have been on the wane, but Quaker theology was still radical. Vincent dismissed Penn's assertion as 'a strange composition... of impudence and folly', which 'boldly and blasphemously' destroyed the 'great fundamental truth' of God.⁹⁴ Moreover, Penn's polemical outburst landed him a six-month stay in the Tower of London for blasphemy.

On 16 December 1668, Secretary of State Lord Arlington (bap. 1618, d. 1685) gave orders that Penn should be taken into custody for writing the 'Blasphemous' *Sandy Foundation*.⁹⁵ Penn may well have been initially incarcerated as part of a crack down on unlicensed Quaker pamphleteering;⁹⁶ however, once in prison the emphasis quickly turned to his 'blasphemous and Hereticall Opinions'.⁹⁷ Indeed, under the auspices of the King, Edward Stillingfleet (1635–1699), then rector of St Andrew's, Holborn, was granted access to the Quaker explicitly to make an assessment of Penn's beliefs. Penn later acknowledged that he had been courted by the Socinian patron Thomas Firmin (1632–1697) at the time and so the Established Church might have been on a high state of alert, fearing a pincer-like assault on the doctrine of the Trinity.⁹⁸ *The Sandy Foundation* had certainly not gone unnoticed; for the diarist John Evelyn (1620–1706) noted that Penn had concocted 'a blasphemous booke, against the *Deity* of our B[lessed] *Lord*'.⁹⁹ It would appear that there was an assumption by many non-Quakers that the Quaker's denied the incarnate Christ and shirked away from his divinity. This was far from the case; however, it may be speculated that Quakers were able to use this erroneous theological assumption to their advantage. By professing to believe in the deity of Christ in unity with God, Quakers might have been able convince non-Quakers of their Trinitarianism without actually undermining their quasi-Unitarian theology. While in prison, Penn wrote to Arlington, stating that he had 'always expressly own'd & maintain'd the eternall diety of Jesus X^t, and substantiall unity of Father, Word & Spirit'.¹⁰⁰ Penn subsequently made a similar, public declaration in *Innocency with Her Open Face* (1669).¹⁰¹ Once set in the context of Quaker theology, Penn's comments can be construed as little more than a carefully worded affirmation of non-Trinitarian Quakerism; yet it was reported that Stillingfleet, among others, was convinced that Penn 'is sensible of the Impiety & Blasphemy of his said Hereticall Opinions, and that he doth recant and retract the same'.¹⁰² A sober, apparently Trinitarian, confession of faith, rather than a clear and detailed recantation, was enough to see an order given for Penn's release on 28 July 1669. Many anti-Quakers remained unconvinced of Quaker orthodoxy *vis-à-vis* the Trinity. At best Penn was seen as a dangerous equivocator; at worst a conceited liar; for, 'to say that he could not speak Blasphemy in one place, because he is Orthodox in another, is idle and inconsistent'.¹⁰³ If Vincent had been alive in 1684, he would no doubt have been appalled to discover that the *Sandy Foundation* had been republished. The perception that the Quakers were cloaked antitrinitarians was as strong as

ever: as an indignant Francis Bugg later claimed, 'They [the Quakers] tell you they own a Scripture Trinity, but mean not a word of it'.¹⁰⁴

Working from the premise that 'where-ever God is *essentially*, there is *whole* God, the *infinite* God', anti-Quakers took the Light within to mean that God dwelt essentially within the believer.¹⁰⁵ Confirming a Thomistic conception of blasphemy, Thomas Vincent declared that, with regards to the Trinity, 'The Title of God with universal sovereignty, and eternal blessedness, cannot without blasphemy and absurdity be ascribed unto any creature'.¹⁰⁶ Similarly, Thomas Comber noted that to believe in an essential indwelling of Christ '*dethrones Christ from God's Right Hand, and destroys our Faith, our Hope and our very Religion, even the whole Covenant of Grace*'.¹⁰⁷ This representation of aggravated unbelief was exacerbated by the anti-Quaker consternation that such a sin exhorted the most preposterous and perverse lie that God was co-substantial with human beings, making the creator also the created.¹⁰⁸ The supposed blasphemous heterodoxy of Quaker theology with respect to God's essence had already been demonstrated by the 'Quaker-Jesus' phenomenon. Henry Pickworth (c. 1673–1738), a religious writer and former supporter of the Quakers, declared, 'it is no less than Blasphemy in their great Apostle Fox, to pretend himself to be the *Son of God*...[and also] a high degree of the same Blasphemy for him to exalt his Nonsensical Scribbles, as the infallible Word of the Eternal God'.¹⁰⁹ According to Charles Leslie, the extreme 'Possess'd Quakers...do impiously *Blaspheme*, and call themselves *Christ*'.¹¹⁰ Such 'self-idolising' was seen as the 'great destroying Sin of all the ungodly world'.¹¹¹ The Light within was thus conceived to be a fallacy, an idol constructed by the human mind, which conveniently exalted human lunacy. Anti-Quakers represented Quakerism as 'blasphemous' because it was manifest through '*such pride*' and '*the fulnesse of iniquity*', confirming Quakers as 'impudent Creatures, Devils incarnate, [who] dare outface heaven, and vie with God'.¹¹²

Anti-Quakers were not able to acknowledge Quaker claims on anything like their own terms, but critiqued the Light within from their theological and impassioned perspective, which helped fashion a blasphemous monster from an alternative belief. Furthermore, beyond the discrete spheres of anti-Quaker experience, it may be speculated that the preoccupation with affirming Protestantism as a 'rational religion' meant that supposed enthusiasm was increasingly understood via rationality rather than theology, leaving the latter to predisposed Calvinist defenders of Trinitarian orthodoxy. Pondering how Quakers might conceive the indwelling of Christ, anti-Quakers tended to believe that they 'proselyte souls to the Light within'.¹¹³ Thus, according to anti-Quakers, the Quaker's deity was but a projection of themselves, for they sought to redefine the nature and role of the human soul so that it could house a supposed divine entity.

From St Augustine to John Calvin, it had been a fundamental theological truism that 'the soul is made by God' and was 'an immortal yet created essence'.¹¹⁴ As Calvin made clear, 'creation is not inpouring, but the beginning of essence out of nothing';¹¹⁵ hence there was no transfer of divine essence from creator to the created. The creation and immortality of the soul were not seen as mutually exclusive, nor was the latter a signifier of divinity. God created an incorporeal element within humans that had the capacity for spiritual knowledge. This conception of the

human soul was crucial to a Trinitarian explanation of how human beings could be aware of and believe in God. By contrast, non-Trinitarian theology did not necessarily adhere to such a notion of the soul; and this was particularly true of the Gnostic tradition. Indeed, both Augustine and Calvin had defended their positions on the human soul against the ancient heresies of Priscillianism (a branch of Gnosticism that flourished in fourth-century Spain) and Manichaeism (a belief system founded by the third-century Persian Mani which focused on providing a synthesis of contemporary religions) respectively. However, in seeking to defend a truism, debate inevitably became polemical. Augustine denounced the Priscillians as blasphemous liars;¹¹⁶ while Calvin asserted that, 'if man's soul be from the essence of God through derivation, it will follow that God's nature is subject not only to change and passions, but also to ignorance, wicked desires, infirmity, and all manner of vices'.¹¹⁷ It would appear that anti-Quakers used similar tactics in their polemic.

According to the Norfolk clergy, the Quakers' blasphemy against God primarily consisted of their claims to be 'one Soul with God'.¹¹⁸ This representation of blasphemy clearly corresponded with the Thomistic conception of blasphemy as aggravated unbelief on account that it simultaneously negated the supposed nature of true divinity and appeared to confer divinity upon humankind. To take just one example, they seized upon a 1656 passage by the Quaker polemicist Edward Burrough (1633–1663) as an apparent admission of guilt. In answer to the question, 'Is that very Christ, with that very Body within you, Yea or Nay?' Burrough had replied, 'The very Christ of God is within us, we dare not deny him'.¹¹⁹ Here, the Norfolk clergy construed the term 'very' to mean 'identical' (an understandable presumption given that Burrough had gone on to state, 'we are Members of his body, and of his flesh, and of his bone') to denounce the blasphemy of the claim.¹²⁰ In an attempt to refute the charge of blasphemy, Richard Ashby sought to distance contemporary Quakers from the wayward comments of the deceased Burrough: 'though, he had received a Measure of the same Spirit, which was in the *Holy Pen-men*; yet *Dispensations Vary* according to the manifold Wisdom of God; and therefore we prefer the *Bible* before [Burrough's] Books, and all other Writings Extant whatsoever'.¹²¹ George Whitehead's refutation was much less defensive. Besides theological conviction, Whitehead would have perhaps been bound by a sense of duty to defend the man who had been second only to George Fox in the Quaker hierarchy since Nayler's demise. In launching into a powerful counter attack, Whitehead asked, '*Examine your selves whether you be in the Faith, Prove your own selves, know ye not your own selves, how that Jesus Christ is in you, except ye be Reprobates*' (reference to 2 Cor. 13:5).¹²² The clergy were not convinced. Like many other anti-Quakers it was the failure of the Quaker disputants to renounce former Quakers as blasphemers that proved the sticking point: 'We may see how loth *Whitehead* is that *Burrough* should be counted a Blasphemer'.¹²³ In reiterating their original point the clergy suggested that if Burrough had spoken directly and honestly then he

must say that very Man Christ, and that very Body of Christ is within us; but that is such an evident Falsehood, that is beyond the power of any man alive to defend it, even of *Whitehead* himself, whose chiefest faculty lies in that way...to shape the most ugly deformed Blasphemies, so that they shall appear most Divine Truths.¹²⁴

The failure by Quakers to recognise Quakerism as anything but a patent untruth and a sanctimonious delusion was seen as proof that the Quaker lie about God was so big and so ingrained that it extended to blasphemy.

For John Cheyney, the Quakers' supposed pitch essentially to unite the human soul with God was a frightful and detestable notion. What was more, Cheyney believed that the evidence of the Quakers' blasphemy on this count was plain. For example, he noted that in 1673 William Penn had declared 'We (Quakers) assert the unity of God and Soul'.¹²⁵ For anti-Quakers, such a declaration appeared to be an admission that Quakers could be divine. Cheyney made clear that no human could claim to be God 'without highest Blasphemy and Usurption'.¹²⁶ Here, the term usurpation provides a sense of the way in which blasphemy was conceived of as spiritual treason. Citing George Fox, in his *Great Mistry of the Great Whore Unfolded* (1659), Cheyney asserted that the Quakers 'do plainly hold *the Soul of Man to be without beginning, and infinite it self*'.¹²⁷ This was in direct contravention of the orthodox conception of the human soul as created by God; for as Cheyney reminded his readers, 'God only is without all beginning' (Ps. 90:2).¹²⁸ The Light within was represented as a doctrine that saw 'no difference between Creator and Creature, Cause and Effect, Time and Eternity, All things and Nothing' and was thus 'monstrous, blasphemous and impossible'.¹²⁹ Cheyney played out the hypothetical scenario of conflating God and human: 'O Blasphemy and Impiety! If mans Soul be God, then God is sinful, and shall be damn'd and tormented in Hell; for the damned in Hell have Souls, and are damned for sin.'¹³⁰ Here, Cheyney's polemic can be seen to match that of Calvin's: the emphasis was not a one-dimensional notion of unbelief, but a polemical representation of aggravated unbelief: the blasphemous victory of the liar, the anti-Christ.

It would seem that the inter-relatedness of orthodox doctrines was one of the principal reasons why non-Trinitarian speculative theology was perceived to be so destructive. Through a quasi-Unitarian conception of God, early Quakers subscribed to an alternative conception of the Godhead that rendered the theological precepts of orthodox Christianity meaningless. For this reason, the doctrine of the Light within was not only seen as blasphemous by nature but also by its consequences. As Charles Leslie made clear, the 'monstrous Notion of *the Light within*, is the Ground and Foundation of all their other Errors and Blasphemies'.¹³¹ According to the Norfolk clergy's charge sheet, the other blasphemies of Quakerism concerned the person of Christ, Scripture, and scriptural ordinances. I shall now address each of these in turn.

The historicity of Christ was essential to revealing the archetypes of God's grace: incarnation and atonement. Thus, to renounce the nature and purpose of Christ incarnate and believe in an alternative would have been seen by the vast majority of Protestants as a wholly perverse act which inverted truth and falsehood, God and the Devil. Non-Trinitarian Quaker theology was perceived to be a lie against '*That Jesus Christ is God and man*', exhuming the blasphemous 'extreams' of 'old Hereticks' like Arius.¹³² Thomas Comber was unequivocal that Quakerism '*destroys the Reality and Truth of his [Christ's] Humane Nature*' and as such was inherently '*Antichristian*'.¹³³ Charles Leslie similarly noted that Quakerism had reduced 'the true and real Christ, of whom that Man *Christ Jesus* was but a *Type* or Figure'.¹³⁴ This emphasis on the

truth and reality of the person of Christ seems to resonate with Thomistic blasphemy. Since God's nature was believed to be a criterion of his truth, the Quakers' apparent speculative blasphemy had the potential to deny both in the most demonstrably wicked fashion. To investigate the evidence used to accuse the Quakers with blasphemy against Christ, I shall briefly consider Charles Leslie's controversy.¹³⁵

Like many anti-Quakers, Leslie was convinced of an unholy alliance between Quakerism and Socinianism: a diabolic plot to uproot and destroy Christianity. Such a view may initially seem unfathomable since early manifestations of the former pertained to a belief in Christ's total divinity, while the latter emphasised his humanity. However, the offence of antitrinitarianism lay not merely in its false description of the Godhead, but also in its theological implications. Hence, Leslie was able to allege that, 'the *Quakers* are direct *Socinians* for they positively deny the [doctrine of] Satisfaction'.¹³⁶ Here then, both enthusiasts and rationalists were drawn together by their supposed blasphemy against the person of Christ: the lie against the truth of atonement, whereby the implicit appeal to human perfectibility proved the state of pride necessary to maintain the delusion. In one attack, Leslie noted that George Whitehead 'Runs on *Blaspheming*, and (with the *Socinians*) *Ridiculing* the Doctrin of *Satisfaction* by *Jesus Christ*, whom he *Denies* to be *God-Man* or the *Saviour* of the World'.¹³⁷ Penn was also denounced as a blasphemer for continuing 'the old *Socinian* Job Trot' that Christ's satisfaction was '*Irreligious* and *Irrational*'.¹³⁸ Leslie argued that in denying Christ's satisfaction, Quakers and Socinians alike had no conception of God's mercy for sinners, which was 'great *Non-sense* as well as *Blasphemy*; and utterly inconsistent with the *First Notions* of a *God*'.¹³⁹

Leslie maintained that Quakerism held an indisputable 'blasphemous contempt of Christ'.¹⁴⁰ To legitimate this claim, he reminded his readers of the protestations of earlier Quakers. In 1654, Christopher Atkinson (fl. 1653–64) had railed against orthodox priests by claiming, '*Your imaged God beyond the Stars, and your Carnal Christ is utterly deny'd—That this Christ is God and Man in one Person is a Lye*'.¹⁴¹ In 1659, Humphrey Woolrich (c. 1633–1707) had declared, '*That Christ was never seen with the any Carnal Eye, nor his Voice heard with any Carnal Ear*'.¹⁴² In the same year, George Fox had stated that, 'if there be any other *Christ* but that was Crucify'd within, he is a *False Christ*'.¹⁴³ In what modern readers might see as the banal polemic of oppositionalism to support an alternative belief, the theological critique employed by anti-Quakers observed a most complex manifestation of wickedness. For anti-Quakers, the Quakers' apparent denial of an outward Christ was not represented as a one-dimensional transgression, for its unapologetic defiance was evidence of the most consummate lie, which aggravated the sin to the point of blasphemy.

The supposed denial of Christ's humanity was seen as proof enough that the Quakers' theology was enthusiastic antitrinitarianism: the product of an 'Ignorant and Deluded *heart*', forming 'the height of Spiritual Pride'.¹⁴⁴ Appealing to Scripture, Leslie spelt out the full horror of the unending nightmare that would befall blasphemous Quakers:

a strong *Enthusiastick* habit may fix a Man's Thought so long upon a beloved Object, as to dazzle his Understanding, and glare so in his Eyes, that without considering, the

grossest *Absurdities* will go down; and the highest *Blasphemies* gain a pretence, even of *Piety* and *Exalted Devotion*. This is the *Devil* transform'd into an *Angel of Light*. This is the most *Fatal and Irrecoverable* State of a *Soul* we fall in Love with our *Diseases*, and, as in a *Calenture*, mistake the deepest *Oceans of Presumptuous Blasphemy*, for sweet and pleasant Fields of *Contemplation*, and even *Humility*; and thus mistake *Hell* itself for our *Heaven*.¹⁴⁵

Here, it would appear that St Paul's decree on 'false prophets' was woven with the Thomistic theology of blasphemy as aggravated unbelief. Misplaced religious enthusiasm could, if unchecked, lead to spiritual ignorance, creating a vacuum that was filled by human pride. At a stroke, a desire to know God was replaced by a potentially fatal deviation. Pride created the capacity to accept heresies willingly. An unflinching belief in heresy as truth marked the beginning of blasphemy, and an eschatological tipping point. To become a 'false prophet' tipped the balance towards damnation, for this was a higher state of enthusiasm whereby a lie about God was propagated as divinely inspired. This act confirmed that one was irredeemable. It can be speculated that what seems to follow helps to explain the notion of the greatest blasphemy as an unpardonable sin. Via providence, God seized the individual which was lost to him and ensured that their blasphemous delusions continued for eternity. In critiquing Quaker speculative theology, it would appear that Leslie had developed an interpretation of unpardonable blasphemy. Anti-Quakers had a perception that extreme blasphemers were damned forever because they were forced by God to blaspheme ceaselessly without end, making them incapable of repentance.

Turning to the nature and role of Scripture: St Paul decreed that the scriptures 'are able to make thee wise unto salvation through faith which is in Jesus Christ' because 'All scripture *is* given by inspiration of God, and *is* profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness' (2 Tim. 3:15-16).¹⁴⁶ This view was enmeshed into Reformed biblical theology. Faith in Christ allowed the Scriptures to be read correctly, enriching spiritual knowledge and legitimating belief. A denial of an historical Christ undermined his role as mediator of that spiritual knowledge which was set down by the inspiration of the Father in scripture (Heb. 9:15).¹⁴⁷ Calvinism revelled in the omniscience of Scripture, contrasted with the fallibility of human reason, while the doctrine of 'right reason' offered an alternative way of subordinating one's scriptural exegesis to divine law. The crux of orthodox belief was that humankind could not unilaterally pass judgment on the status, meaning, or efficacy of Scripture. To do so was to turn away from God in a pride-induced blasphemous enterprise. In citing St Jerome, Thomas Comber warned that 'the Book of Chronicles is such that without it, *if a man arrogate to himself the knowledge of Scriptures, he doth but abuse and delude himself*'.¹⁴⁸ For Charles Leslie, any human proclamation which claimed to have greater authority than Scripture was 'Proof of his being *Stark-Mad*'.¹⁴⁹ Many anti-Quakers were convinced that the Quakers' blasphemous enthusiasm combined a corrosive pretence to higher spirituality with a delusional circumvention of a mediated manifestation of God. To address the evidence anti-Quakers used to charge their enemy with blasphemy against the Scriptures, I shall consider the claims of the Norfolk clergy.¹⁵⁰

Francis Bugg's associates poured over Quaker texts to find *prima facie* instances of blasphemy against the Scriptures. They observed that George Fox had, in his seminal *Newes coming up Out of the North* (1653), dismissed the Scriptures as 'Carnal', describing how the 'GOSPEL IS BUT DUST, MATTHEW, MARK, LUKE, and JOHN, which is the Letter'.¹⁵¹ The force of Fox's claim was seen as a breathtaking example of how the Quakers did '*Vilifie and Speak Contemptuously of the Scriptures*'.¹⁵² Contemptuous vilification of God was the very essence of Thomistic blasphemy, describing both a state of aggravated unbelief and the degradation of God. In response to the Norfolk clergy, George Whitehead attempted to clarify Fox's statement by explaining 'The *Letter* it self is not made up of Spiritual Matter, or Lasting Materials, but of such as will decay, and turn to Dust'.¹⁵³ However, the clergy dismissed this as a 'trifling Answer' which negated the 'first Languages whereby the Doctrine of Salvation was conveyed to the World'.¹⁵⁴

Another affirmation of the Quakers' perceived guilt was seen to be clearly evidenced in the 1653 joint declaration of George Fox and Richard Hubberthorn that, '*It is DANGEROUS to read (viz. the Scriptures) which the Prophets, Christ, and the Apostles spoke forth freely*'.¹⁵⁵ This claim appeared to encapsulate early Quaker belief that the Scriptures were but a worldly and corrupt substitute for a direct relationship with God. George Whitehead once again defended the words of his brethren by introducing the caveat that, 'Tis not said to be *dangerous* to all Men to *read the Scriptures*' but only men 'that pervert them'.¹⁵⁶ The clerical retort was that the Quakers performed 'a profane Slander upon the Scriptures' and that 'it must still go for a Blasphemy against the Scriptures, that it's dangerous to read them'.¹⁵⁷ The gulf between Protestant biblical theology and non-Trinitarian Quakerism rendered a serious discussion of scriptural exegesis pointless. Whitehead's implicit allegation that it was the Church of England which peddled a false view of the Scriptures was ignored because it was seen as a baseless and desperate charge which only masked the blasphemy of calling God's word dangerous.

The Norfolk clergy were also keen to stress that the Quakers' view of Scripture was a product of their wicked pride. They leapt upon an early comment by Fox and Hubberthorn—that their critics 'might as well condemn the Scriptures to the Fire as some of...[their] Queries'—as evidence that the Quakers believed their writings to be as holy and edifying as God's word: 'Most impudent Blasphemy!'¹⁵⁸ Similarly, William Penn's 1673 assertion that, 'No Command in the Scripture, is any further Obliging upon any Man, than as he finds a Conviction upon his Conscience' was censured for raising the suggestion that humankind could rise up and usurp the will of God, as laid down in the Scriptures.¹⁵⁹

In summary, Quakerism was represented as enacting blasphemy against the Holy Scriptures by degrading them via a pride-riddled and wickedly false belief system. As one Quaker apostate trumpeted:

Come, and behold (a thing most true)
The **Quakers**, how they do pursue;
With Daggers Points, GOD's holy Word,
It to destroy, with one Accord.

Lo! how it breaks their Daggers keen,
And makes those *Monsters* to be seen.¹⁶⁰

Here was a reminder to both Quakers and non-Quakers that the power of God's word would uncover 'false prophets' and damn them for the blasphemous demons that they were. The poem was accompanied by an illustration which depicted the hands of Fox, Penn, Whitehead, and Burrough stabbing a copy of the Bible with daggers (see Fig. 1 below). The Quaker lie about the Scriptures extended to spiritual treason against God, graphically presented as an attempt to murder his word.

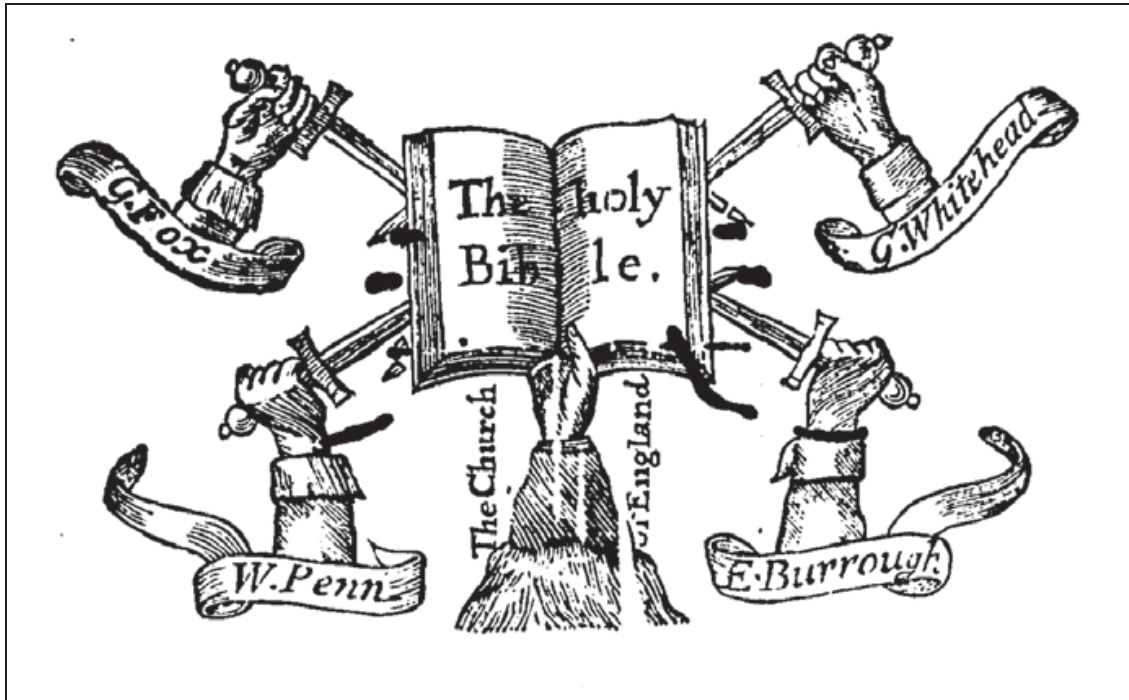


Figure 1. Marther, W., *Of the Quakers Despising the Holy Scriptures*, 3rd edn; London, 1700, broadsheet.

By appearing to deny the divinity, and hence purpose, of the Scriptures, non-Trinitarian Quaker theology was also represented as making the Gospel ordinances void. Reformed theology understood Scripture as the mediator between the doctrine of predestination and sacramental modes of grace: the latter was necessary and wholly commensurate with the former. Sacraments were neither external ceremonies, nor spiritually autonomous events, but the means by which Christ gave assurance to his people.¹⁶¹ John Calvin noted, 'in Scripture the Spirit of God is continually urging us to hope for the resurrection of our flesh[;] Thus baptism, according to Paul, is the seal of our future resurrection (Col. 2:12); no less does the sacred Supper invite us to confidence in it'.¹⁶² Baptism was one of the most essential sacraments, affirming the New Covenant and profoundly separating those cleansed of hereditary original sin from those inadmissible to the Church. According to St Peter, 'even baptism doth also now save us (not the putting away of the filth of the flesh, but the answer of a good conscience toward God,) by the resurrection of Jesus Christ' (1 Pet. 3:21). The belief that baptism was a spiritual 'new birth' was upheld as the twenty-seventh

Article of Faith of the Church of England. Partaking in the Lord's Supper was also a necessary part of one's ongoing spiritual commitment to Christ, bringing true Christians together and admonishing heretics (1 Cor. 11:18–34).¹⁶³ The spiritual meaning of communion did not diminish after it was stripped of the doctrine of transubstantiation. The twenty-eighth Article of Faith reminded believers that the Lord's Supper was a sacrament of redemption.¹⁶⁴ It is important, therefore, to highlight that the theological role and the spiritual ideal of the sacraments were somewhat distinct from the politics and inconsistencies that blighted their practice.¹⁶⁵ Through baptism and communion, soteriology was mixed with the opportunity to define spiritual identity and unity: that is to say, a belief in the truth and reality of Christ and the Church through sacrament. To finally consider the case for the Quakers' blasphemy against the sacraments, I shall turn to the work of John Faldo.¹⁶⁶

For Faldo, the claim that 'there is no such thing as *Ordinances* now under the *Gospel*' was one of '*the Capital Errours and Blasphemies of the Quakers*'.¹⁶⁷ He noted that, in 1655, James Parnell (bap. 1636, d. 1656) had dismissed baptism without to '*be formal imitation, and the invention of man, and so a meer delusion*', and the Lord's Supper to be nothing but '*Feeding upon the husk and shadow, which is carnal*'.¹⁶⁸ Emboldened, William Smith (d. 1673) had played the proverbial card of Reformation polemic by claiming that the ordinances of baptism and bread and wine '*rose from the Pope's invention*';¹⁶⁹ whereas, John Higgins (1633–1667) had claimed that '*Water-Baptism was but the administration of John*'.¹⁷⁰ Flabbergasted, Faldo stated that for anyone who had read the Scriptures this was clear blasphemy for it was 'too palpable an untruth'.¹⁷¹ The Quakers' commitment to inward baptism demonstrated 'their abundant scorn' of the sacraments that descended to 'down-right railing'.¹⁷² In 1675, the year that Faldo's controversy came to an end, the theologian Henry More (1614–1687) wrote to Penn expressing his extreme disquiet about wayward elements of Quaker theology, particularly its rejection of baptism and communion. For More, 'that the most excellent thinges of the Gospell be not slighted, condemned or suspected, by men through the odnesse and indiscretion of such as seem the most zealous professors of them' was an intimation not unlike St Paul's decree: 'Let as many servants as are under the yoke of their masters worthy of all honour, that the name of God and *his* doctrine be not blasphemed' (1 Tim. 6:1).¹⁷³ Such a view was only confirmed and exacerbated by the Quakers' apparent demonic ability to 'delude people' by claiming to own the doctrines of both baptism and communion, when they 'call [them] quite another thing'.¹⁷⁴

In summary, the Quaker's claim to direct inspiration threatened to circumvent the much lengthier and convoluted route to salvation detailed by orthodox Christianity. The Light within was doctrinal minimalism, destroying at a stroke the vast and complex notion of Christianity that had gone before. By appearing to pull out the linchpin of the Trinitarian Christ, anti-Quakers were convinced that Quakerism denied the true pathways to grace through Christ, Scripture, and sacrament; and in so doing denied the truth and reality of God himself. To deny God may have been atheism, but to construct and purport to believe in an elaborate fiction which maliciously claimed to be true was devilish blasphemy.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to go beyond the generic slur that Quaker ‘Wild Enthusiasm ends in Blasphemous Pretence to Sinless Perfection, Infallibility and Equality with God’, to understand the theological basis for the representation of Quakerism as blasphemy.¹⁷⁵ As far as anti-Quakers were concerned, Quaker enthusiasm propagated something far more dangerous than socio-political subversion from a supposedly idiosyncratic and flawed theology. On account of their apparent antitrinitarianism, Quakers were represented as having turned away from God to become the latest generation of ‘false prophets’, one of the greatest theological threats to Christianity. In such cases, enthusiastic antitrinitarianism signalled spiritual treason: blasphemy against God, Christ, and the Scriptures. Richard Clark has noted that the doctrine of the Light within was the Quakers’ Achilles heel because it frequently created a barrier to Protestant acceptance.¹⁷⁶ This paper demonstrates that, in some quarters, it was much more than that. In summarising the sin of Quakerism, John Faldo turned to the second-century Father Irenaeus who had once said: ‘*While Hereticks speak like the faithful, they not only mean otherwise than they say, but clean contrary. And by their Tenets full of Blasphemies, they destroy the Souls of those, who with their fair words, suck in the poison of their foul opinions*’.¹⁷⁷ For anti-Quakers, the battle with Quakers was theological as well as social and political, for Quakerism was perceived to epitomise the wicked blasphemy of the false prophet.

NOTES

★ This paper is derived from chapter six of my PhD dissertation, ‘Blasphemy in England, c. 1660–1730’ (University of Cambridge, 2009). An earlier version of this paper was delivered to the Early Modern History Graduate Workshop at the University of Cambridge during the Lent Term of 2006. I would like to thank Mark Goldie, Michael Mullett, Kate Peters, and my anonymous referees for their advice in writing this paper.

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31. For further details on the points raised in this paragraph, see Damrosch, *Quaker Jesus*, pp. 69–114; Underwood, *Lamb’s War*, *passim*. For an alternative view, see Moore, *Light in their Consciences*, pp. 98–111.

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133. [Comber], *Christianity No Enthusiasm*, unpaginated epistle to the reader [p. xxiii–xxiv].
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137. [Leslie, C.], *A Defence of a Book Intituled, the Snake in the Grass. In Reply to several Answers put out to it by George Whitehead, Joseph Wyeth &c.*, London, 1700, part 1, p. 181. The quotation was in reference to Whitehead's *The Light and Life of Christ Within* (1668).
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140. [Leslie], *Defence*, part 1, p. 131.
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144. [Leslie], *Snake*, pp. lxxxii, lxxxi.
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